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**From:** Kenneth W. Meyer, Resident of North Seattle

**To:** The Northgate Stakeholders Group  
To whom it May Concern

**Subject: Comments on the Stakeholder Advice for the Northgate  
Commons and the 5th Avenue Streetscape Projects**

**Representatives of citizens' organizations, commercial interests and  
government entities:**

**My Qualifications to comment:** I have attended at least a portion of almost every one of the recent stakeholders' meetings, but I am just beginning to feel that I have a reasonable grasp of what is actually at stake. As a resident of Seattle for whom the Northgate commercial area provides important resources, but who does not feel well represented by citizens' organizations whose activist constituency resides more immediately adjacent to that district, I feel the need to make independent observations.

In addition, as an engineer whose career of over forty-plus years has involved a substantial amount of analysis of complex systems, from a foundation built on degrees from Princeton and the University of Washington, I have felt that these observations of concern would be worthy of your serious consideration.

**The "Systems-Level" Problem:** I am particularly concerned because every one of the projects included under the purview of the stakeholders is intended, if successful, to bring more people to the nexus of Northgate, either as residents, customers or patrons of the public facilities. That will inevitably result in more traffic and more demand for parking. However, each of the projects seeks to actually reduce the free flow of traffic or the traditional allocation formulas for parking.

Furthermore, each project has been considered in isolation, and decisions have been made on attractive aspects of the individual proposals, as depicted in the typically highly optimistic architects' rendering art, without any real consideration of the dynamics of the traffic flow under the constraints imposed, or the realistic demands for parking as they will actually occur, finding their own equilibrium configuration via the paths of least resistance.

Many of the consequence will not be pleasant; and the predictable reaction will be to invoke punitive measures to thwart the ingenuity of drivers. Ultimately, this will seriously undermine the benefits anticipated from these projects. Of course, at some point, true saturation will no doubt be reached, but I see no legitimate reason to hasten that day via arbitrary, premeditated restrictions on both traffic flow and parking resources, all in the name of esthetics for the few and economic benefit for the even fewer.

**Role of the Automobile at Northgate:** A PI editorial on December 5, 2003 observed:

“There's room for compromise in Seattle's Northgate controversies. Any viable plan, though, requires recognizing Northgate Mall for what it is: a regional asset inextricably tied to auto usage.

“It's encouraging that the Northgate area is also becoming a transit center. And the neighborhood will continue to become a more attractive residential area with varied housing types.

“But the mall and the immediate area around it will remain heavily oriented toward automobile traffic for the foreseeable future. The city will shortchange itself by pretending otherwise.”

Thus, the stakeholders should appreciate that most of us come, and will continue to come, to Northgate to purchase a pair of pants or a CD, check out a book, or get on a bus – and then get home ASAP. Even relatively close-in residents are not typically going to willingly walk home carrying a new dress and a pair of shoes, a half dozen heavy books, or a weighty valise full of work-related documents. Many residents of advanced age or moderate disability will be simply incapable of doing so. Impositions on our time also mitigates against strolls at four miles per hour to access these facilities and services.

Efficient and effective accommodations for automobile circulation and places for them to alight therefore remain critical factors in making decisions about our destinations. Trees in the medians will not be an over-riding factor for any of these people, and will not even make the food taste better at existing “formula”, chain restaurants. Such amenities will improve the dispositions of only a relatively very small group of close-in residents, who will benefit disproportionately from the investment of public funds and the appeasement of developers, to the overall detriment of the functionality of the area as what the PI called, “... a regional asset inextricably tied to auto usage.”

If the automotive experience at Northgate is too painful, we will get our books at the Broadview or Greenwood library branches, our pants and shoes at Alderwood, and we'll simply take our cars downtown with us, since the experience will be no more painful or expensive there than here. All of this will simply defeat the objectives of reducing net automobile miles driven in the area and making Northgate an attractive place to live, work and shop, and will instead result in increasing congestion on the freeway and downtown.

The Northgate Transit Center, in conjunction with the availability of high capacity Park-and-Ride lots, may be the most successful project that Metro has implemented to unload the freeways as well as downtown congestion and parking grief. This project succeeds in filling two large parking lots virtually to maximum capacity every weekday because it is attractive to commuters who use the buses voluntarily, not because artificial, punitive constraints have forced them to do so. This should be the goal in all instances.

**Lorig Associates' Demands for Parking Relief:** As for the data in support of reducing Lorig Associates' parking requirement, I maintain that the comparisons are lame -- colorful pie-charts notwithstanding -- and in particular, that Overlake is not a very logical parallel. I also believe that we don't have the complete picture, such as whether Metro may be expecting to pay Lorig Associates for use of spots shared with them, or whether Lorig Associates plans to charge rental tenants for parking separately from their rent, in which case they will all migrate immediately to the Park-and-Ride area – the dynamics of paths of least resistance being fundamental.

I appreciate the fact that the stakeholders are willing to make their approval of the rezone requests contingent on receiving further information about the parking analysis and monitoring of the parking situation as built. However, I object to an outright

endorsement of the proposal on the basis of the information currently available, inasmuch as the information that may be provided in the distant future is not going to undo a "fait accompli" memorialized in concrete. That is, it is not likely that Lorig Associates will jack-up a building and slip in another parking deck, or even make radical modifications to working drawings that are pretty far along – no matter how deficient the current analysis may prove to be on further scrutiny.

Any mitigation of a bad situation that might be necessary in the future, due to faulty estimates of parking requirements, or as a result of ignoring the psychology of the renter who owns one or more autos, is almost certain to be detrimental to the cause of those who currently make use of the parking facilities available in the area. This is especially true, given that other development in the area will also place demands on southern parking facilities, either directly or because spaces in other parts of the Northgate complex are filled and demand is pushed down into other areas.

We really need more information now, as it appears that there may be a "slowly modulated squeeze play" going on. That is, the demand – and threats to kill the project constitute a demand – for parking relief has reared its head very late in this game; and who knows what additional demands for concessions may appear as the project progresses and becomes more "locked-in".

I did once overhear one of the developer's representatives commiserating to another that, "...people are just going to have to get used to paying for parking...", and it is not at all beyond the realm of possibility that Lorig Associates has such a revenue stream in mind as a future benefit to the project's cash flow, when the relief granted proves to upset the current equilibrium of parking needs. Of course, it's not that we haven't been paying for the available parking already, via egregious property and other taxes.

Note well that it is apparently the policy of the city to encourage the charging of rent for parking spots separately from dwelling spaces, which in this case, may be lucrative for the developers, but counter-productive for others who have been depending on the Park-and-Ride spots, because the path of least resistance will certainly be for residents to opt for public parking until it becomes essentially unavailable.

In fact, the Mayor holds out reduced parking requirements as an incentive to build lower-rent apartments, but how can we be sure that savings in parking construction will be passed-on to the residents, especially in a tight housing market, which will bear a lot of abuse? Or will this be simply a gift to developers?

Given their claims of substantial experience in building similar projects, it is unlikely that Lorig Associates is unfamiliar with the dynamics of the parking process. This means that they won't sell very many of their own spaces to renters until other alternatives have been "maxed-out" or the renters are too wealthy to care. On Capitol Hill, for example, that means "now", because on-street parking is tantamount to unavailable (which is certainly a significant disincentive for me to go there for any reason); but in Northgate, there is this very handy sea of Park-and-Ride spaces that are empty in the evening and that will remain filled during the day by vehicles belonging to residents who take advantage of buses to go to work, or who stash additional vehicles in the Park-and-Ride while the availability of a rented space in the Commons-residents-only compound is assured at all times for one of their vehicles. These alternative ploys make the official statistical figures for parking utilization elsewhere even more suspect, and require analyses based on very specific situations.

There is clearly a point at which parking possibilities may be exhausted, when new facilities will be prohibitively expensive for government agencies to provide, and when commuters will be faced with less desirable choices (as noted, one of which will be to drive downtown, thus negating the benefits of the Transit Center and Park-and-Ride solution that is working extremely well right now). The remaining choices also include paying through the nose for parking, which is just another regressive tax on those who fill the essential but lower-paid tasks in our society, or for persons whose mobility is limited by age or even moderate disability. I do not believe that the arrival of this situation should be hastened or exacerbated by essentially having the citizens of Seattle give a gift to the Commons development, or any other similar one.

Zealots operating under the euphemistic "Transportation Demand Management" processes often take a punitive approach to automobile ownership and use. However, in instances where it is at all feasible to provide parking, that should be done, and the public should not be subsidizing residents of specific developments. If automotive pollution is the major concern rather than parking spots, these agencies should be lobbying for having "pseudo-truck SUV's", and even legitimate pick-up trucks, subject to the pollution standards that are in effect for passenger cars, and should be promoting other means of mitigating per-car emissions.

**Traffic Flow and Stakeholder Advice on Modifications to 5th Avenue:** Equally important to the effective use of automobiles to access the Northgate complex is the design of modifications to 5th Avenue, which has been dormant in recent stakeholder discussions, but appears to be the subject of Advice to be approved now. It is disconcerting that the Seattle Department of Transportation is showing plans for blocking the center lane of 5th Avenue before the analysis of traffic flow has been performed, under the conditions predicted in view of the new developments, by Murai Associates. Issuing Advice at this time is therefore premature.

We should not forget that SDOT, in its wisdom, has been removing pedestrian crossings and expecting citizens to walk four or more blocks just to cross a street. This disconnection from reality arguably contributed to the recent serious injury of a citizen at 87th Street and 15th Street NW and should lead to increased scrutiny of SDOT's recommendations.

**Potential Impacts of 5th Avenue Modifications on Traffic Flow Efficiencies:** Stakeholders should appreciate (and should spend a little time observing traffic at the intersection of 5th Avenue and Northgate Way during rush-hours) that the present center lane provides an essentially infinite left-turn "pocket". Reducing the length of these pockets can have extremely adverse results. If left-turning traffic "overflows" the pocket, the through traffic is effectively reduced to one lane. Conversely, if through traffic waiting in the "inside lane" blocks access to the left turn "pocket", left-turning traffic will have to wait one or more traffic light cycles just to access that pocket.

These scenarios are obviously not conducive to efficient movement of traffic, and the principle of the "path of least resistance" predicts that traffic will resort to other routes. Center two-way turn lanes are a very valuable resource in facilitating traffic flow and in actually reducing the incentive for more risky and undesirable traffic decisions that will be used as alternatives when these lanes are removed. These alternatives will typically not please residents in the area and will result in the advocacy of punitive techniques to discourage such rerouting, such as are already in evidence in the area. In many cases, residents will be "shooting themselves in the feet", inasmuch as the punitive techniques will adversely affect their own movements as well.

**Legitimate Expectations of Local Residents for Traffic Relief:** The above is not to mention that the usurping of public rights-of-way by local restriction is a very questionable imposition on the other citizens of the city. The Bottom Line is that it is unreasonable to expect that one can live a few blocks from major urban amenities and still retain a lifestyle more suited to, say, Snoqualmie or North Bend.